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ABSTRACT

One of the working papers in the final report of the Arizona Board of Regents' Task Force on Excellence, Efficiency and Competitiveness this study presents the results of meetings with representative staff advisory bodies, staff groups, and individuals at Arizona's three public universities to discuss their views of their role within the system. It is noted that the universities rely heavily on the support of classified personnel to help maintain the quality of the institution, but staff members tend to feel that though they should be sharing in both profits and risks, they are only sharing the risks. Staff morale tends to be low at all three schools, though there are positive aspects to employment at the universities (e.g., job security, employee benefits, and interesting environment). However, there is general displeasure with salary levels and annual uncertainty about salary adjustments. Concern about recognition closely follows concern about salary. The difficulties in effecting reclassifications and promotions for themselves and those they supervise are a major source of displeasure. Classified staff feel they are silent partners in the running of the institution. The 14 recommendations include: discourage exploitation of staff; develop networking and communication among staff on all campuses; include staff representation on more university committees; and develop a means through which staff can provide suggestions about the delivery of administrative services. (SM)

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ATTRACTION AND RETENTION OF CLASSIFIED STAFF: THE SILENT PARTNERS

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The universities rely heavily upon the support of classified personnel to help maintain the excellence, efficiency and competitiveness of the institutions. A useful working model is:

ADMINISTRATION + FACULTY + STUDENTS + STAFF =
THE ARIZONA UNIVERSITY SYSTEM
AND THE REALIZATION OF MISSION AND GOALS

As partners in the management of "the company," the staff should expect to share in its profits and risks. During meetings with classified staff at the University of Arizona, Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University, we learned that in the staff's view, only the risks are being shared.

At UA and ASU, we met with the representative staff advisory bodies. At UA, this is a group of 24 persons appointed by the President of the University; at ASU, it is a group of 11, of whom eight are elected by staff to represent geographic areas of the campus and three are appointed by the University President. At UA, the group reports through the Associate Vice President for Administrative Services; at ASU, the liaison is the Vice President for Business Affairs.

At both schools a representative from the Personnel Department sits informally with the group. NAU does not have a representative staff body; we met with staff groups and individuals, totaling approximately 23 persons, arranged through the Personnel Department. Our contacts constitute a small number of total staff, but we met with groups and individuals who are representative, in some more or less official way, of the staff.

Although staff morale is generally low at each school, there are positive aspects to employment at the universities. In each group, the immediate responses to "what are the pluses of working at the University?" were job security and employee benefits. Particularly at ASU where job competition from the community is much greater, the staff recognized that their salaries are lower than those paid off campus, but they felt their positions were less likely to be affected by changing economic conditions. The medical and education benefits were significant to everyone. Many use the education waivers themselves or apply them to spouses and children. Medical benefits were considered very good; at NAU especially, where the benefits package is

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more comprehensive, this was a major advantage to working at the University.

Other positive attributes are that many of the jobs are perceived as more interesting than those found off-campus, the campuses themselves are dynamic environments, the people are diverse, and, to a degree, there is recognition of the mission of the university and a desire to be a partner in realizing that mission.

The up-sides have down-sides, and there were many problems expressed by the staff. Although job security is important, there is generally great displeasure with the salary levels and the annual uncertainty about salary adjustments and performance awards. Community salaries are generally higher and this is perceived as one of the reasons for high staff turnover and a continuing need to recruit anew and train anew. Staff who want to remain at the universities, for whatever reasons, are faced with accepting lower pay and the probability of not being able to move upward in the classified system. It was a general perception that the classification system is uneven and that inequities exist, both within the institutions and among them, but there was little optimism that the Arthur Young classification study would offer significant improvement. The staff did not believe that the Young study would have any effect on their status, and many participated grudgingly in the data-gathering.

Concern about recognition closely follows concern about salary. The staff feel neither adequately appreciated nor a valued part of the University community. They feel taken for granted. They want to be told more about what is happening at the institution and not to depend on the local newspapers for information. Many of them assume an active role in assisting students and in many cases have more contact with students than some faculty and administrators, but they don't feel this crucial activity is recognized. As far as their input into the administration, the staff feel generally powerless to have any influence.

The staff feel that the available job descriptions are too generic and not specific enough; for many of them this leads to doing tasks that are beyond their job classifications. There are still bosses who expect secretaries to pick up their laundry.

The difficulties in effecting reclassifications and promotions, for themselves and for those they supervise, are a major source of displeasure. Long time lags were cited, also lack of communication about the status of a request, the perceived inability of personnel specialists to adequately review a request because of lack of knowledge of many university jobs and job titles, and the perception of a general lack of interest in the fate of the staff. There are also inequities in reclassifications between state-funded and nonstate-funded positions. Departments who do not want to lose valued employees were reported to have blocked promotional transfers; off-campus applicants were hired to fill positions within a department, that would have been a career advancement for a current employee, because the new person could be paid at entry level. Supervisors who want to promote from within are hindered by lack of appropriate funding. These examples are the kinds of actions that say to staff that they are powerless.

Complaints about working conditions, another reason for staff turnover, ranged from lack of adequate and appropriate space (a major concern) to outdated, inefficient equipment, difficulty in securing supplies on a timely basis, cumbersome personnel systems, and even unsanitary and unsafe conditions.

There was concern about the understaffing of the universities. Work responsibilities continue to grow but the staff are expected somehow to expand to meet new demands without acquiring additional personnel. The staff feel that the efforts they put forth during times of financial cutbacks become the expected standards, with no recognition of the hours of uncompensated time that are being donated. It is this lack of awareness of the extra efforts of the staff that give rise to the perception that only the risks of the partnership are being shared with them.

It was generally agreed that the staff are of high quality. The difficulty in remaining competitive in attracting highly skilled technicians and computer specialists was cited, and the need for such searches to be national in scope. In most cases, this is being done at all three institutions.

The question of the partnership role of the staff in the general organization was of prime importance. The feeling generally at NAU was that the administrators were accessible to staff. They are visible on campus and are well known. However, the staff felt that they were not part of the communication link between administration and faculty. At ASU, the members of the Staff Committee felt quite comfortable with their relationship with the administration, but they felt they had little contact with or awareness of faculty concerns and activities. The members of the UA Staff Council were generally satisfied with their interactions with the administration. None of the staff felt that they held a place in the decision-making chain or that they had any significant influence. Even though there is no formal staff organization at NAU, there is staff representation on several university committees. However, many of the staff were not aware of this and did not know, for example, that they were represented in negotiations regarding benefits. At ASU and UA, when staff are put on university committees, some selections are made from the staff committees.

The education waivers and the developmental training programs are incentives to retention of staff, but these are not available evenly. Some employees are given time off to attend classes, some have to make up the time, others are allowed to take only night classes. Training programs sponsored by the Personnel Department are free to all employees at ASU; at UA and NAU there are charges for some courses and the staff perceive that employees from 'rich' departments have better access to these than those from 'poor' departments. And again, time off and funding are at the discretion of the supervisor and are sometimes perceived to be used punitively.

Reaction to the performance review system was muted because in no one's mind did it have any relevance to merit pay. The perception is that pay adjustment decisions are based, often, on the whim of the supervisor and not on one's record of accomplishment. Implementation of the guidelines linking performance appraisal and merit increases should be carefully monitored. There were no serious problems voiced with the review system itself, except that

at ASU it was felt that the system was somewhat confusing because each department uses its own review instrument. Both NAU and UA have standard forms in use throughout the institution. At UA it was felt that the forms are cumbersome and time-consuming and should be completely reviewed. (This review is presently underway, with staff representation on the review committee.)

Salary scales are uniform through the tri-university personnel system. Accelerated hiring rates vary depending on which positions are difficult to fill. All three universities use accelerated rates for secretaries, administrative assistants, computer-related jobs, and police personnel. The accelerated rates are reviewed annually with an eye to difficulty in filling positions and competition from the community.

Many experienced staff have ideas and suggestions about efficiency and productivity that they are eager to share. Thus the formation of Venture Teams[1] would be especially appealing. It is time to experiment with ways in which employees can assist in providing more efficient and effective administrative services. Staff need the opportunity to submit suggestions, such as through a central "suggestion box" or formal work teams, and they must be persuaded that their ideas would be given serious consideration. The contributions made and the implementation of such contributions would need to be well-publicized campus-wide to give credibility to the notion that the staff's experience is valued.

Two other constituencies surveyed by the Task Force on Excellence, Efficiency and Competitiveness--faculty and students--strengthened the position that the staff play a vital role on the campuses.[2] Faculty cited their need for experienced, capable staff assistance and also for the flexibility to be able to award and retain excellent staff. The students indicated a good deal of contact with staff, but there were some negative comments about the courtesy and helpfulness of staff.

CONCLUSIONS

The classified staff feel they are the "silent" partners in the running of the institution. They share in the mission, they perform their roles within the guidelines given them, they suffer the risks involved, and they want to share in the profits. These people should be recognized as full working partners with the faculty and the administration, to the benefit of the entire institution.

There should be no attempt to reduce the benefits available to staff, especially the education waiver.

One of the most effective ways to maximize the use of resources would be to expand programs for training staff. Such programs would provide more productive employees, thus helping to solve some of the problems that accompany limited resources. Increased job satisfaction and morale would result in lower attrition and reduced turnover costs. Enhanced opportunities for employee growth and advancement would result in more proficient employee performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop enhanced methods of communication among administration, faculty and staff that will attempt to be responsive to the needs of the staff. A sense of community that acknow-

ledges a shared mission is needed.

- Develop a career path for classified staff that allows them to prepare themselves for advancement and minimizes the problems that arise when an employee reaches the top pay scale in his/her classification. Develop policies regarding career paths that are clearly understood by supervisors and that assure that staff will have first opportunity to move forward when opportunities occur.

- Develop a staff representative body at NAU.

- Alter the format of the Staff Council at UA to include some elected representatives.

- Develop a means through which staff can provide suggestions about the delivery of administrative services, such as Venture Teams, and communicate widely the implementation of such suggestions.

- Develop a university-wide orientation program for staff that stresses their role in the mission of the university and defines the organizational framework as a partnership.

- Develop departmental orientation programs that stress the mission and organization of the department, the pattern of interaction among faculty, staff, students, and any segment of the community the department deals with.

- Include staff representation on more university committees.

- Make participation in education and training benefits more equitable campus-wide.

- Develop networking and communication among staff on all campuses and allow opportunities for collective problem-solving on each campus and between campuses.

- Devise creative ways to shift staff assignments during peak periods, but do not deny new hires when expansion dictates.

- Develop and encourage opportunities for service between staff and the community. Encourage staff always to serve as representatives of the university. For example, allow minority staff to have a role in the recruitment and retention of minority students.

- Provide more recognition activities for staff (e.g., a "Staff Day" at the union facilities with discounts to all staff); encourage departments to recognize staff and publicize the results appropriately.

- Discourage exploitation of staff.

ENDNOTES

1. See the discussion of the Venture Team in the Task Force Final Report, pages 46 - 47.

2. See Working Papers entitled, "A Survey of Undergraduate Student Opinions," (K. Church), "Survey of Factors of Student Access and Persistence in the Arizona Universities," (A. Cotera), and "Recruitment and Retention of Faculty: An Imperiled National Resource," (G. Davis).